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ABSTRACT

A study examined the effect of news values, source types, and competition on coverage of a 1988 urban riot in Shreveport, Louisiana. The final editions of "The Times" of Shreveport and the "Shreveport Journal" which appeared over the four-day period of a riot were analyzed and the content of each story was categorized. Results indicated: (1) both newspapers used more "unknown" than "known" sources; (2) the larger circulation paper--"The Times"--used a greater diversity of sources than the smaller circulation paper; (3) the newspaper coverage emphasized manifestations of discontent rather than analyzing the causes of the protest; (4) coverage tended to have more of an order-authority orientation rather than an issue-orientation; (5) the larger circulation paper devoted more coverage to order issues than the smaller circulation paper; and (6) there was no significant difference in the intensity of coverage. Findings appear to indicate that news values of conflict and of order, as well as competitive and market factors, exert some degree of influence. Findings also suggest that such influences win out regardless of the predominant usage of one type of news source. (Twenty-one notes are included, and two tables of data are attached.) (RS)

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Study of a Riot: The Effect of News Values and Competition on Coverage by Two Competing Daily Newspapers

by

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Presented to 1989 Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Convention Newspaper Division panel, Aug. 13, 1989, Washington, D.C.

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Since the first modern urban riots in the 1960s, the news media have come under criticism for their coverage of riots. The Kerner Commission said the media failed to sufficiently present and analyze the basic reasons for the disorders.[1] The commission's content analysis was the first study of contemporary riot coverage and though it examined only national coverage, it urged "intensive scholarly exploration" of "a whole range of questions" that went unnamed.[2]

Lange, Baker and Ball explored the role of the media in resolving social conflict and concluded that news media slight the causes of the protest at the expense of reporting the manifestations of discontent, physical confrontation.[3] Balanced treatment, they argued, would necessitate explaining the demonstration's purpose, describing the events leading up to it, describing the demonstration itself and exploring the provocations, if any, directed toward the police.[4]

Mass communication researchers and theorists, while largely concentrating on non-riot coverage, nonetheless have tried to unearth content influences. Their approaches have varied. For example, Ryan and Owen analyzed local social issue coverage for the influence of the type of news. They found no significant difference, however, between the amount of event-oriented and issue-oriented coverage.[5]

Gans found national newspapers and magazines downplay violence without explaining why the violence has occurred or its effect on a community.[6] This was confirmed by Shapiro and Williams' examination of two specific newspapers' coverage of a civil disorder.[7] Gans had reasoned that frequent stories about disorders suggests that order is an important value in the news, which he saw as generally supporting the social order

of public, business and professional, upper-middle-class, middle-aged and white-male sectors of society.[8]

Paletz's and Dunn's case study of why and how one newspaper covered a riot found an "authority orientation" directed at calming racial tensions and curbing violence while presenting the riot almost exclusively from the perspective of law enforcement and city officials.[9] The paper's reporting staff was organized to report the riot not from the perspective of those engaged in the violence but from the perspective of those attempting to control it.[10]

In examining the role of sources and news policy, Gans hypothesized that news media source selection was a question of differential access to the news media. He suggested that news organizations discriminate against newsmakers among "the poor, the powerless and the ideologically marginal," thus making scarce news about and for them.[11] Newsmakers who can manage journalistic access, however, lose some influence over news organizations when they must compete with other sources and when journalists must develop new angles in order to successfully compete with rival journalists.[12]

Lacy, in examining the effects of intracity competition on daily newspaper content, found that intense competition forces a newspaper to spend more money to differentiate itself from its competitor. That difference, however, is unlikely to come in news space allocation because of the difficulty of predicting news flow. Rather, competing newspapers will choose to remain substitutes for their competitors in the types of news and the depth of coverage in those areas.[13]

Shapiro's and Schofield's examination of two specific newspapers'

coverage of a civil disorder also looked at the news value of proximity of the conflict within a competitive environment The larger newspaper devoted relatively less space to the incident and less front-page space than did the smaller newspaper but managed a higher percentage of background information in its coverage.[14]

On the heels of these efforts, this study attempted not only to replicate Shapiro and Schofield but also to consolidate and test the previously mentioned studies and hypothetical suspicions in examining local newspaper coverage of another civil disorder which occurred in Shreveport, La. Two general circulation newspapers in the same city but with different circulations and geographical distributions were studied to determine what effect news values, source types and competition had on coverage of the disorder.

Nine hypotheses were proposed:

1) Both newspapers would use significantly more "elite" or "known" sources than "non-elite" or "unknown" sources (Gans).

2) The larger-circulation newspaper's coverage would have more source diversity than the coverage by the smaller-circulation newspaper (Gans).

3) Newspaper coverage significantly will emphasize manifestations of discontent and physical confrontation over the causes of the protest (Lange, Baker and Ball).

4) Newspaper coverage significantly will tend to have more of an order-authority orientation than an issue-orientation (Paletz and Dunn).

5) There will be no significant difference in intensity of coverage between the newspapers. Lacy found the number of square inches of space

per reporter to be a valid correlate of competition intensity while Danielson and Adams found that completeness of coverage was a function of the number of wire services and the number of reporters a newspaper had.[15] Intensity of coverage will be measured in square-inches/per reporter.

6) The newspaper with wider geographical circulation will devote significantly less total coverage to the disorder than will the newspaper with narrower circulation (Shapiro and Schofield).

7) The newspaper with wider geographical circulation will devote significantly less front-page coverage to the disorder than will the newspaper with narrower circulation (Shapiro and Schofield).

In addition, the study examined the contradiction between the third Shapiro and Schofield hypothesis (that the newspaper with the larger circulation, as the market's "newspaper of record," will devote more coverage to background of the disorder than will the newspaper with the smaller circulation) and the supposition of Gans and of Paletz and Dunn that the newspapers will have more of an order/authority orientation than an issue orientation.

It would seem that Shapiro and Schofield's finding could have been the result of hindsight on the newspaper's part (there was another riot two years earlier). It also would seem that the larger Shreveport newspaper, as the paper of record and with the larger readership, would be more interested in <u>maintaining</u> the status quo: another way of saying its coverage would value order over background. So it is hypothesized that:

8) The larger-circulation newspaper will devote significantly more coverage to order issues than the smaller-circulation newspaper; and

9) The smaller-circulation newspaper will devote significantly more coverage to background issues than the larger-circulation newspaper.

Methods

Racial tensions in Shreveport's predominantly black Cedar Grove area exploded into riot Sept. 20, 1988, when hundreds of residents burned two businesses, looted several more, fired weapons and pelted police and firefighters with rocks and bottles after a black man was slain by a white woman.

Two women pulled into a grocery store parking lot in what police called an attempt to purchase narcotics. One of the two women -- 17-year-old Tamala Vergo -- reportedly was robbed of her money, then opened fire into a crowd of bystanders, hitting and killing 20-year-old David W. McKinney. As news of the shooting spread, blacks congregated in the parking lot and threw bricks at the business and at all passing white motorists.

The succeeding night saw a rise in tension as store owners took up arms in anticipation of possible trouble. More brick throwing and random gun shots were reported while black leaders criticized the mayor for his reluctance to cite racism as the root of the violence. The next two days saw various leaders calling for calm while Cedar Grover residents and city officials gathered in a series of meetings and discussions aimed at defusing the matter.

Newspaper Selection. This study selected two general-circulation newspapers: *The Times* (of Shreveport) and the *Shreveport Journal*, which co-exist in a joint operating agreement. *The Times* is owned by the Gannett Co., Inc.; the *Journal* is independently owned while sharing

common office, distribution and production facilities.

The Times has an average circulation of about 78,000 -- more than 78 percent of the daily newspaper audience and more than 3.5 times that of the *Journal*. Shreveport is in extreme Northwest Louisiana, making it a half-hour drive from either Arkansas or Texas and as a result *The Times* is distributed in the three-state Ark-La-Tex region. The smaller *Journal* primarily circulates its 22,000 copies in the more immediate Shreveport metropolitan area.

The Times, but not the *Journal*, publishes a Sunday edition with an average paid circulation of about 110,000,[16] although the Sunday issue was not examined because it contained no coverage of the riot per se (*The Times* that day began a five-day series -- "In Black And White" -- concerning local race relations; the *Journal* ran a similar series of stories over a two-year period). Both newspapers publish two editions daily. Examination of those issues found no difference in coverage between the two issues.

Content Analysis. This study analyzed all sections of the final editions of each newspaper from Sept. 21, 1988, to Sept. 24, 1988. Coders measured -- in column inches, using a six-column format -- each story or article dealing with the riot and related issues. The researcher mathematically converted stories not fitting this format so as to facilitate comparison.

Coders coded each story's content -- using the Shapiro and Williams[17] format, based on the recommendations of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders -- into the following categories:

1) causes of the civil disorder: coverage of the McKinney shooting and

reportage of the other disorder causes, such as poor housing, lack of job opportunities, etc.;

2) activities of the disorder: coverage of the disturbance's actual events, such as looting, brick-throwing, etc.;

3) results of the disorder: reports of damages, losses, arrests, etc.;

4) activities resulting from the disorder, activities that would not have occurred if it had not been for the disorder: the establishment of jobs programs, efforts to provide help to victims, reporting about media coverage of the events, etc.;

5) corrective action: action that should, will or had been taken to correct the disorder;

6) reaction to the disorder: government, public and international reactions; and,

7) return to normalcy: reporting the return to normal activities.

Coders totalled column inches in each story as they applied to the seven categories. For example, if the causes (category 1) and the corrective action (category 5) appeared in one story, coders separately recorded column inches devoted to each. Thus, a story on the riot could be placed in many categories. But each category was exhaustive and mutually exclusive.

Each category's column inches for each newspaper were computed (see Table 2). Intercoder reliability on this section was .82, lower than Shapiro and Scholfield's .94 reliability.

In addition, coders counted sources and types of sources into the following categories:

A) identifiable sources: a source's name or the name of an

organizational source is used (e.g., "according to police, ...");

B) public, leader or "known" sources: of those in category A, those who hold positions of influences in government or an agency of the government and those who head or speak for a well-known organization (e.g., the chief of police or the president of the local NAACP chapter);

C) community, private or "unknown" sources: on-the-scene observers, average person on the street and, generally, those who are not "known" sources; and

D) official or "authority" sources: similar to category B, but including any law enforcement official, spokesman or representative who is not a "known" source in the normal sense of the word (e.g., "police Det. Sgt. Ron Snell said...").

Each category's total for each newspaper was computed (see Table 1). Intercoder reliability on the source-counting section was .72.[18]

Coders also counted the number of authors on each story. Any anonymous stories were considered to have one author.

Results

Nine hypotheses were tested in this study. The first hypothesis was that both newspapers would use more "elite" or "known" sources than "non-elite" or "unknown" sources. Table 1 data show the opposite.

Both newspapers used more "unknown" sources than "known" sources, in nearly a 2-to-1 ratio when all figures were combined. *The Times* used a slightly greater percentage of such sources -- about 71% to 61% -- than did the *Journal*.

The second hypothesis, that the coverage of the larger-circulation newspaper -- since it would have more resources in developing new angles

to compete with the *Journal* -- would have more source diversity than the coverage by the smaller newspaper, was by and large supported. It was thought that the larger newspaper's unknown source-to-known source ratio would be larger than the ratio of the smaller newspaper. When the unknown-to-known source ratio of each newspaper in Table 1 is examined, the ratio of *The Times* (2.42) is larger than the 1.57 ratio of the *Journal*.

The third hypothesis predicted that newspaper coverage would emphasize manifestations of discontent and physical confrontation over the causes of the protest. It was believed that the newspapers would not offer balanced treatment of all angles of the riot, i.e., the newspapers would carry a greater overall percentage of stories dealing with categories 2 (activities of the disorder) and 3 (results of the disorder) than stories dealing with category 1 (causes of the disorder).

As Table 2 indicates, the data tend to support this hypothesis. The newspapers gave 291 column inches, 27.3% of their coverage, to categories 2 and 3 while category 1 received 23.8% of the coverage, or 254 inches. However, the difference was not significantly different. So the third hypothesis was not supported.

The fourth hypothesis predicted that newspapers coverage would tend to have more of an order-authority orientation than an issue-orientation. It was believed that the newspapers would carry a greater overall percentage of stories dealing with categories 2 (activities of the disorder), 3 (results of the disorder), 4 (activities resulting from the disorder) and 6 (reaction to the disorder) than stories dealing with categories 1 (causes of the disorder) and 5 (corrective action).

Table 2 data show the newspapers gave 575 column inches, or 53.9%

of their coverage, to categories 2,3,4 and 6 while categories 1 and 5 received almost 40% of the coverage, or 405 inches. The difference was statistically significant ($p<.05$), therefore the fourth hypothesis was supported.

Similar to the third hypothesis, the eighth and ninth hypotheses also dealt with this issue of order- vs. issue-orientation. The eighth hypothesis predicted that *The Times* would devote more coverage to order issues than would the *Journal*. It was expected that the larger newspaper would carry more column inches dealing with categories 2 (activities of the disorder), 3 (results of the disorder), 4 (activities resulting from the disorder) and 6 (reaction to the disorder). Table 2 data support this hypothesis, *The Times* carried 375 column inches (more than 71% of its total covearage) in these four categories, as compared to the *Journal's* 250 inches, 46% of its total coverage ($p<.001$).

The ninth hypothesis predicted that the *Journal* would devote more coverage to background issues than would *The Times*. It was expected that the smaller newspaper would carry more column inches dealing with categories 1 (causes of the disorder) and 5 (corrective action). Table 2 data indicate that that was indeed the case, as the *Journal* carried 276 column inches -- 51% of its total coverage -- in these categories while *The Times* carried 129 inches -- a fourth of its total coverage and less than half that carried by the *Journal*. Still, the difference was, surprisingly, not statistically significant. So this hypothesis was not supported.

However, the fifth hypothesis, that there would be no significant difference in intensity of coverage between the newspapers, was

supported. It was believed that differences in coverage were unlikely to come in space allocation because of the difficulty of predicting news. So in this case, it was felt that the number of square inches of coverage per reporter would not significantly differ.

Computing from the data in Table 2, *The Times* had 1,050 square inches of coverage while the *Journal* had 1,084. Study coders found that *The Times* and *Journal* had 38 and 39 reporters or bylined authors on their stories, respectively, making the intensity of coverage 27.642 and 27.794 square-inches per reporter -- not a significant difference ($p<.05$).

Finally, the sixth and seventh hypotheses predicted *The Times* would devote less total coverage and less front-page coverage, respectively, to the disorder than would the *Journal*. Table 2 shows that *The Times* devoted a smaller percentage ($p<.05$) of its newshole (8.9%) to reportage of the disorder than did the less-widely distributed *Journal* (15.8%). Similarly, *The Times* devoted a smaller percentage of its front-page newshole (19.0%) to reportage of the disorder than did narrower-circulated *Journal* (26.9%). The front-page difference, however, did not prove statistically significant.

Discussion

This study's results tend to -- albeit inconsistently -- support earlier suspicions or findings. Raw data support every hypothesis save the first (both newspapers used more unknown sources than known sources). Given news organizations tendency to rely on routine channels of information,[19] the data's lack of support for the prediction that both newspapers would use more "known" sources than "unknown" sources comes as a bit of a surprise. Perhaps the non-routine, somewhat chaotic

nature of a riot influenced the newspapers' source selections to the point that routine sources were inappropriate as well as inadequate.

Still, the data supported the second prediction that the larger *Times'* coverage would have more diverse sources than the *Journal's* coverage. This comes as no surprise since the larger newspaper has a larger reporting and editing staff and thus could be expected to have a much larger range of sources from which to choose.

The tentative, non-statistical support for the third prediction (that the newspapers' coverage would emphasize the discontent and physical confrontation at the cost of explaining the causes) was expected. After all, a riot is a conflict and conflict is a traditional, attractive element/value of news. Perhaps the surprise -- and the statistical obstacle -- comes from the relative closeness of the inch-count (291 inches v. 254, only 37 inches -- less than 4% of all coverage -- in favor of conflict).

Support proved greater, however, for the fourth hypothesis, which predicted the newspapers would have more of an order-authority orientation than an issues perspective. Again, this does not surprise in light of the fact that order is an enduring journalistic value.

The interesting fact comes when this result is compared to the results for the first hypothesis: Order was well-represented in story content but not in source-orientation. Some 525 column inches (slightly less than half all coverage) had an order-authority orientation but only about a third (34%) of all sources were "known" sources and only 28% of all sources were official or "authority"-type sources.

As to the specific newspapers, *The Times*, as predicted by the eighth

hypothesis, was significantly more order-oriented in its coverage than the *Journal*, which, in contrast, was more background issue-oriented (as predicted by the ninth hypothesis). Although *The Times* published nine fewer stories than its competitor, the stories' "order content" was twice as much as that in the *Journal* (15.6 inches per story compared to 7.8 inches). The *Journal's* "issue content," in comparison, averaged 8.4 inches per story, only 3 more inches than that in *The Times*, which could explain the lack of statistical support for this finding.

Neither finding surprises, however, because the larger *Times*, as the "paper of record" for the area, is expected to appeal to the broader, more conservative audience's desire for the status quo in terms of law and order. Unlike the reasoning of Shapiro and Schofield,[20] in which the larger newspaper was assumed to have an obligation to inform its readers why a riot occurred and what's being or should be done to prevent a re-occurrence, this was the <u>first</u> such disorder in Shreveport. So an order orientation would be more likely to occur than if the disorder had been preceded by another disorder (such as was the case studied by Shapiro and Schofield).

Meanwhile, the *Journal*, in attempts to offer itself as an alternative to *The Times*, promotes itself as the "liberal" newspaper of the area and champion of minority issues. This makes the *Journal's* "issue" orientation somewhat expected.

Another interesting, yet unexpected, finding concerns the fifth hypothesis' prediction that intensity of coverage between the newspapers would be the same. Indeed, it was near-identical in terms of square-inches per reporter (27.7 to 27.6). The interesting part comes in the fact that one

newspaper is nearly four times as large as the other, with more than twice the staff. Whereas the types of coverage differed in terms of order- or issue-orientation, the total intensity of that coverage stayed the same at each newspaper. This lack of difference probably arises from the event-like nature of the subject. Events normally are covered from the "what-happened" standpoint and news space allocation likely will not be an area where newspapers can distinguish themselves in reporting events.

Finally, the sixth and seventh hypotheses were supported, as was expected given the example of preceding research. The more widely circulated *Times* did give less overall and front-page space to the disorder, although the latter finding was not found to be a statistically significant smaller amount. As Shapiro and Schofield suggested and as is probably the case with *The Times*, the larger newspaper is in less need of new readers and can afford to not only devote proportionately less coverage to a riot than a smaller-circulation newspaper but also is in a position to temper its front-page with less-dramatic stories.[21]

Conclusions

This study's results should help scholars in their search for key newspaper content influences. The data indicate that news values of conflict and order, as well as competitive and market factors, exert some degree of influence. The results also tend to suggest that such influences will occur regardless of the predominant usage of one type of source.

Although there appears to be a degree of similarity among the two competing newspapers' total coverage, differences occur when the various aspects of coverage are examined. To wit, each newspaper tends to stress one area more than another. The publication with readers in a wider area

includes less reportage as a percentage of the front page and of the entire newshole than the smaller newspaper, but the amount of coverage is about the same.

Of some concern, however, are the different content emphases of each newspaper. How different should competing newspapers be and how should this be reflected in their content when a vital social issue is at stake? Researchers need to further explore the role of the source selection and idea assignment processes and how they affect content, especially in an area as sentitive and vital as race relations in general and urban race riots in particular. There also should be some investigation of the change in coverage over time and effort should be taken to compare non-crisis, non-event coverage to coverage of highly dramatic events such as riots.

Finally, what effect does the coverage have on reader attitudes? Does an order-oriented newspaper coverage of race riots create or engender more racially tolerant attitudes or does it foster even more antagonism between the races? This study has attempted to show that the coverage among competing newspapers will differ in its emphasis. Further research is needed to determine the effect, if any.

Endnotes

1. The Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), p. 373.

2. Ibid., p. 389.

3. David L. Lange, Robert K. Baker and Sandra J. Ball, Mass Media and Violence, Vol. XI: A Report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, (U.S. Government Printing Office: Washington, D.C., 1969), p. 89.

4. Ibid., p. 95

5. Michael Ryan and Dorothea Owen, "A Content Analysis of Metropolitian Newspaper Coverage of Social Issues," Journalism Quarterly, 52 (1976), pp. 634-40+.

6. Herbert W. Gans, Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, and Time, (Pantheon News: New York, 1979).

7. Mitchell Shapiro and Wenmouth Williams Jr., "Civil Disturbance in Miami: Proximity and Conflict in Newspaper Coverage," Newspaper Research Journal, 5 (1984), pp. 61-69.

8. Gans, op.cit.

9. David L. Paletz and Robert Dunn, "Press Coverage of Civil Disorders: A Case Study of Winston-Salem, 1967," Public Opinion Quarterly, 33 (1969), p. 339.

10. Ibid., p. 340.

11. Herbert W. Gans, "News Media, News Policy, and Democracy: Research for the Future," Journal of Communication, 33 (1983), p. 182.

12. Ibid., p. 177.

13. Stephen Lacy, "The Effects of Intracity Competition On Daily Newspaper Content," Journalism Quarterly, 64 (1987), pp. 281-90.

14. Mitchell E. Shapiro and Lemuel B. Schofield, "How Proximity, Circulation and Geographical Distribution Influenced Coverage of Miami's Overtown Disturbance," Newspaper Research Journal, 7 (1986), pp. 55-61.

15. Wayne A. Danielson and John B. Adams, "Completeness of Press Coverage of the 1960 Campaign," Journalism Quarterly, 38 (1961), pp. 441-52.

16. Gale Directory of Publications, 1989, (Gale Research, Inc.: Detroit, Mich., 1989) p. 627.

17. Shapiro and Williams, op.cit.

18. Intercoder reliability for both sections was based on percentage of agreement between three trained coders.

19. Jane D. Brown, Carl R. Bybee, Stanley T. Wearden and Dulcie M. Straughan, "Invisible Power: Newspaper News Sources and the Limits of Diversity," Journalism Quarterly, 64 (1987), pp. 45-54, *and* Leon V. Sigal, Reporters and Officials: The Organization and Politics of Newsmaking, (D.C. Heath and Co.: Lexington, Mass., 1973).

20. Shapiro and Schofield, p. 60.

21. Ibid.

TABLE 1: Total Sources, Proportional Source Usage

	Times		*Journal*	
	Number	Percent of Total	Number	Percent of Total
A. **Identifiable**	89	100	90	100
B. **Known**	26	29.2	35	38.8
C. **Unknown**	63	70.8	55	61.2
D. **Authority**	21	23.6	29	32.2
E. **Unknown/Known Ratio**	2.42		1.57	

TABLE 2: Total Column Inches, Proportional Coverage and Percent of Total Newshole Devoted to the Seven Civil Distrubance Categories by the Two Newspapers.

	Times		*Journal*	
	Inches (Percent) (n=525)	Percent of Newshole (Total=8.9%)	Inches (Percent) (n=542)	Percent of Newshole (Total=15.8%)
1. Causes of Violence	82 (15.6)	1.4	172 (31.9)	5.0
2. Activities	123 (23.5)	2.1	83 (15.4)	2.4
3. Results	33 (6.3)	0.6	52 (9.5)	1.5
4. Resulting Activities	62 (11.9)	1.1	8 (1.4)	0.2
5. Corrective Action	47 (8.9)	0.8	104 (19.1)	3.0
6. Reactions	157 (29.9)	2.7	107 (19.8)	3.1
7. Normalcy	21 (3.9)	0.4	16 (2.9)	0.4
8. Cats. 2,3,4+6	375 (71.4)	6.4	250 (46.1)	7.3
9. Cats. 1+5	129 (24.6)	2.2	276 (50.9)	8.1
10. Total %-age, Front Page	18.99		26.94	
11. Cats. 2+3	156 (29.7)	2.7	137 (25.3)	4.0
12. Total inches square	1,050		1,086	
13. Total bylines	38		39	
14. Intensity of Coverage	27.64		27.79	